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ABSTRACT

When composition educators talk about either "theory" or "practice," they are not referring to a monolithic and unified field, but instead to any number of competing, ideologically charged metacommentaries. The "problem with practice" refers to its own socially complex and temporally diffuse nature. Applications of theory to practice often are unsatisfactory because they confront (or fail to confront) the problematic site of text production and consumption that is the composition classroom. There are five pitfalls which such applications have succumbed to: (1) many so-called "applications" of theory are not concrete and therefore not applications at all; (2) many applications favor literary scholarship's predilection for textual analysis; (3) extended, even exhaustive expositions of theories frequently result in few if any concrete applications; (4) painting a picture of disempowered students oppressed by a draconian institution seems disingenuous; and (5) too much responsibility is heaped onto the instructor, who becomes a sort of puppet master. For composition teachers enamored of theory, a whole body of research exists that descriptively renders the writing behaviors of classes as discourse communities utilizing collaborative interactions. Theorists should present a rich, concrete amount of descriptive data to undergird their arguments, as exemplified by Patricia Harkin's essay in "Contending with Words." In this way, the teacher as theorist can begin the move to becoming the much more relevant and productive teacher as researcher. (HB)

The Problem with Theory Is the Problem with Practice

George Otte

Much as I would like to get right to what I have to say, I have to begin with a couple disclaimers. Talking about theory makes that well-nigh necessary, in part because it's given academic name-calling a whole new force and sophistication. I don't want people using the now-standard formulas about how I glibly assumed this or failed to acknowledge that, so I have to say what I might otherwise glibly assume or fail to acknowledge. I know--and now you know I know--that when I speak of theory, I'm not talking about some monolithic thing. Post-Einsteinian physics has far greater reason to hope for a unified theory than post-modernism will ever have. I know of (but don't want to get into) distinctions between theories and theorizings and appropriations of either. I'll presume, with your permission, that when I say "theory" you understand me to be referring to a number of competing, ideologically charged metacommentaries. I'll also presume that you will understand my understanding of practice to be no more monolithic, that I am actually speaking of a variety of practices, techniques, teaching settings, pedagogies. OK?

Given my title, I should also make one more quick disclaimer: the "problem with practice" I allude to is not a problem I find with the practice of composition (not that I couldn't find any), but rather with what Stephen Dedalus might call the ineluctable modalities of our enterprise, above all its socially complex and temporally diffuse nature. When I say, then, that the problem with theory is the problem with practice,

I am giving shorthand form to my sense that applications of theory to practice, as published articles, so often fail to satisfy because, rather than treating the relatively manageable text, they confront (or actually fail to confront) that rich and problematic site of text production and consumption we call the composition classroom.

To give you an idea of the difficulties facing anyone who would show, in the space of an article (to say nothing of a 4Cs paper), how theory might be brought to bear on the vast range of textual practice we call composition, I'll invite you to think of how often we see the whole range of textual production and consumption considered in literary scholarship--so infrequently that we take the large areas of inattention and the pervasive preference for some kind of textual analysis for granted.

In other words, what happens most often in literary scholarship is the encounter with the text as a done deed. The scholar, like a modern-day Galvani, applies the juice--increasingly, the alternating currents of contemporary theory--to the text, and we're invited to exclaim, "Look at that! It jumped!"

But compositionists don't have the kind of reverence for the text that would allow such galvanization of the text to be a sufficient source of fascination. (Perhaps we should.) We don't want to see a dead frog jump. We want to see a whole ecosystem anatomized or adjusted.

That's probably asking for the impossible--which is why, if certain applications of theory to composition don't attain to it,

that's really not the appropriate complaint to make, and really not the complaint I'll be making in the taxonomy of "problems" with theory (as it has been applied to composition practice) that follows. I should also say that I could point fingers and name names--and will if you ask me to afterwards--but I'm not interested in creating a rogue's gallery of botched applications of theory to composition praxis (one reason this talk will probably never become an article); instead, I want to give a typology of pitfalls such applications have courted or succumbed to.

(1) First of all, I need to note that the most common application of theory is really not an application at all. We have the discussion of a theory and its bearing on composition practice, often reaching a polemical or exhortative pitch, but specific classroom scenes or even levels of instruction are too specific for such exercises in sustained generalization. Some of these performances have enough rhetorical force to leave us with a sense that we really must do something--but we're not at all sure what, concretely, that would be (and that's the problem).

(2) Probably the most common way of actually applying theory to practice is to mimic literary scholarship in its predilection for textual analysis--but to add a diachronic element: not just making the frog jump, but giving us before and after jumps. What we get, then, after an extended (too extended) exposition of the theory involved, is analyses of texts as snapshots of development. Usually only one or two students are featured, so such analyses are prey to charges of selected evidence

as well as reductive notions of causation in textual production.

(3) A third variant is indeed an application, but one that scarcely seems worth all the theoretical trouble we've been asked to go through. Again, we have an all-too-extended exposition of a theory (or some aspect thereof), only to arrive at what seem, after all that, fairly trivial consequences. I remember a long discussion of implications a particularly formidable body of theory might hold for writing instruction, but ultimately the only specific example given was the suggestion that a knowledge of this theory, absorbed by teachers and imparted to students, would result in better transitions and paragraph coherence.

(4) If that seems going after a butterfly with a sledgehammer, there's a variant we could call going after a sledgehammer with a butterfly. We are painted a picture of students disempowered and/or marginalized, the site of writing in the service of the dominant culture or the privileged class, a draconian institutionalization of knowledge that shuts students out or lobotomizes those let in--and to combat it all, an instructor happily enlightened by this or that theory. If you endorse the diagnosis, you have to wonder about the prescription. It's not just tilting at windmills if the windmills are really giants after all.

(5) And yet heaping so much on the instructor may be more insidious than quixotic--and more widely characteristic of applications of theory to composition practice. What so often figures in such enterprises is something like the auteur theory

as it applies to film. You know: though film is manifestly a collaborative art, the director is designated the auteur, the author, and the discussion of the film takes the form of "In this scene, Truffaut does this, ..." and "At the end, Godard shows that ...." In most proposed applications of theory to composition, the classroom instructor becomes the auteur: the students produce the compositions discussed (however selectively), but this was puppet theater, and the focus is on the puppet master--the instructor's motives and methods. What about the students'?

That's really not a rhetorical question, especially a damning one. Just what we are having the students do--and to what extent having them do something for themselves is a contradiction--are complicated matters. They need all the light we can shine on them, including whatever illumination theory can provide. Having waxed censorious, I would like to try to envision satisfactory (and perhaps even safe applications) of theory to composition, and I have in fact just broached one, perhaps the most important one. What are we (students and teachers of composition) doing and why are we doing it? What questions could be more interesting or their answers more needful? Can we, then, have theory applied in a largely descriptive, explanatory way? It might be objected that this has in fact happened, but I don't agree. The expositions of theory as they might apply to composition begin with sweeping, far too general gestures. The application that is outlined is not tested, or the testing is inadequate for one of the reasons I've adumbrated above. How

about some close, theoretically informed analyses, not of texts, but of textual practice? How about it indeed? you might wonder. What would these look like?

I could begin with what Derrida calls the reponse de Normande: saying what they would not be. They would not move from general exposition right to presumed results or impassioned polemic. They would not rely entirely on product to exemplify process. They would not offer, as the concrete rather than the general gesture, what are essentially anecdotes about "what I have done" or battlecries about "what we must do." They would not claim new territory without having explored it.

As for what they would do and be, I can say first that we have a whole body of research--a whole other side of composition --that descriptively and fairly exhaustively renders the writing behaviors of classes as discourse communities, that minutely examines composing processes and reading processes and collaborative interactions. You know what I'm getting at: those compositionists who take their methodologies from the so-called soft sciences rather than the French poststructuralists, who publish in RTE rather than in Pre/Text, who deal in charts and tables and talk-aloud protocols rather than deconstructions. I think it's clear whose impact on the profession is greater, that of Foucault or Linda Flower, J. L. Austin or Janet Emig, Bakhtin or Shirley Brice Heath. Teachers want to be told about their practices and their students, and until appliers of theory really begin to give us descriptive analyses of what happens in

the classroom--something the elegant ethnographers of our profession have become quite good at in their own ways--their remarks will continue to hover at the level of implication.

I hope people don't think I'm doing one of those "only connect" numbers--especially some proposal of marriage between Caliban and Miranda. The social scientists of composition have their own theoretical dimensions, as anyone who knows the work of, say, Shirley Brice Heath will be quick to point out. Yet they have something to teach the appliers of theory: how to present a rich, concrete, transtextual mesh of descriptive data to undergird their arguments. Hypothetical examples that come to my mind tend to be microscopic. What if some one were to thoroughly theorize the research that won last year's Braddock Prize: Glynda Hull and Mike Rose's account of one reader misreading? Something closer to a realized example is Patricia Harkin's theory-based counterattack to John Rouse's theory-based attack on Mina Shaughnessy, a defense of Shaughnessy that not only countenances a concrete look at practice but quite properly blurs distinctions between theory and practice, even presumptions of priority, chronological or otherwise.

The only thing in Contending with Words (MLA's self-proclaimed postmodern anthology of theory-meets-composition essays) that contends with anything like the nitty-gritty of composition (and that's thanks chiefly to Shaughnessy), Harkin's essay does at least begin to suggest what might be done, but just how do-able such enterprises would be depends, ultimately, on how

publishable they seem to editors, and here other causes for anxieties arise. College English (and to lesser extent College Composition and Communication) have been too fond of a kind of theory-for-the-masses angle on applications (or non-applications) of theory: primer-like overviews or fairly simpleminded appropriations cannot give us a sense of the complicated interplay between theory and practice. Letters about such articles show the chief concern is with getting the theory straight, as if theory didn't make that an obsession as problematic as any other. Moreover, when the applier of theory does propose to settle on to something concrete, he or she knows journal referrees and editors cotton to textual analysis, and product is bad metonymy for process, even when theory galvanizes product into a process of its own.

What's needed is not more theory-for-the-masses, not more look-what-theory-did-for-one-of-my-students. Yet another call to reconfigure the institution (or the classroom) is probably only going to excite the reader who has been humming that ideological tune all along. Apparently, teachers don't need to be told their classrooms perpetuate dominant discourses as much as scholars and editors need to be told that comp classes teem with authors and go on for months. Theory-mongers have been weaving the wind long enough. They need to mix in some thick description, test the explanatory power of theory on the synchronic complexity and diachronic range of the composition classroom. Let the teacher-as-theorist also be the teacher-as-researcher (and vice versa), and we'll all have something to get excited about.